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## ATG Interviews David Levinson & Karen Christensen

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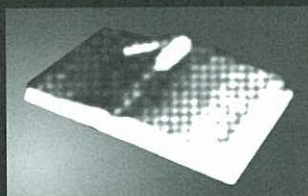
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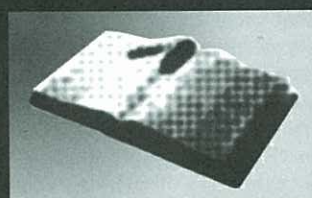
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## ATG Interviews David Levinson & Karen Christensen

### Berkshire Publishing Group

by **Tom Gilson** (Head, Reference Services, Robert Scott Small Library, College of Charleston; Phone: 843-953-8014; Fax: 843-953-8019) <[gilsont@cofc.edu](mailto:gilsont@cofc.edu)>

**ATG:** Tell us a little bit about how the *Berkshire Publishing Group* got started.

**DL & KC:** We started *Berkshire Publishing* in our house in Great Barrington, a picturesque small town in the Berkshire Hills of western Massachusetts, seven years ago. In the course of those years we've moved into Main Street offices, grown to 11 full-time staff, and produced dozens of volumes on a wide range of global topics, from sports to religion, crime to community.

**ATG:** But when did you two first team up?

**DL & KC:** Our partnership began - perhaps all too appropriately! - with an encyclopedia, the four-volume *Encyclopedia of Cultural Anthropology*. It was 1993, and **Karen** had recently returned to the States after ten years in London, where she'd worked in scientific and literary publishing. At this point she was a struggling author, with a couple of books under her belt and two small children, and she took the job as managing editor of the encyclopedia to make ends meet. Her second day on the job was the launch meet-

ing for the encyclopedia, held in the gothic mansion of the sponsoring organization, the **Human Relations Area Files (HRAF)** at Yale University. **David**, an anthropologist



who had got into publishing by being editor-in-chief of the 10-volume *Encyclopedia of World Cultures*, which was still in progress, was vice-president of **HRAF** and the encyclopedia's senior editor. Needless to say,

our first conversation centered on headword lists and prospective authors.

Through that summer we worked together by phone and fax, and found we had similar views about many things, including the need for improved global understanding. In early 1994 we married and **David** began weekly commutes from our home in the Berkshires to urban New Haven. **Karen** got used to explaining that she had married an expert on homelessness, substance abuse, and wife-beating. **David** had to cope with **Karen's** homesickness for London, and litany of best environmental practice. Together we began to develop a shared vision for a reference publishing business that would tackle a wide range of subjects in innovative ways and with a global perspective. By late 1995, **David** resided full-time in Great

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Barrington, continuing as a research associate of HRAF and as senior editor of HRAF's *American Immigrant Cultures*. Berkshire Reference Works (now **Berkshire Publishing Group**) began as a home-based business in early 1996.

**ATG:** What was *Berkshire Publishing's* first solo venture?

**DL & KC:** Our first major project was the three-volume *Encyclopedia of World Sport* with **ABC-CLIO**. Here we developed some key elements of our brand of reference: reliance on top scholars, international coverage, primary text sidebars, and photos as valuable content. When the work

### Walking the Talk

Karen has a brother who was a **Delta Force** commando. He likes to ask if we're "walking the talk or just talking the walk?" We publish on important global issues. Our goal is not to promote a particular point of view but to give readers the information they need to make informed choices. We try to make informed choices ourselves, choices that will make the world — or at least our little piece of it — a better place. We take environmental resource issues seriously in our office. We promote diversity and actively seek employees from a wide variety of backgrounds. We stay involved in our local community in many ways; for example we will be donating part of our profits from the *Encyclopedia of Homelessness* (Sage 2004) to a local organization dealing with affordable housing.

On a personal level, we are influenced by the projects we take on. We've published a lot on sports (*Encyclopedia of World Sport* and *International Encyclopedia of Women & Sports*) and we're pretty sure we're the smallest business in the world with a corporate fitness program. This means promoting wellness through weekly newsletters and monthly activities including hikes, volleyball, and even basketball. The first time we went to the gym at our local college, we joked that people probably thought we'd got lost on our way to the library. Our staff — some of whom had never participated in sports — has responded enthusiastically to this program and we're excited about developing it further. Besides that, we're almost to the size where we can field a softball team!

was a major success in libraries and even with the general public — with rave reviews in *The Times of London*, *GQ*, and *All Sport and Leisure* — we realized we were on the right track.

**ATG:** The *Berkshire Publishing Group* strikes us as unique. Is it fair to say that you are not so much a publisher, as you are a producer and developer of reference works? What is *Berkshire* called by others in the reference publishing business? Who are your main competitors?

**DL & KC:** We call **Berkshire Publishing** "a knowledge and technology company" and the analogy we like to use is that we are reference publishing's equivalent of an independent film company. We come up with the concept, evaluate the competition, make the deal with the publisher (the studio), hire the expert editors and contributors and researchers (the creative talent), direct the content development process, and deliver a clean copy to the publisher. We are increasingly involved in marketing, but this is really the publisher's responsibility. Our type of operation has traditionally been called book "packaging" or "producing," but more recently, the label "content provider" has become popular and perhaps is the most accurate for what we do. In trade publishing, book producers have become an established entity, and there are freelance writers who specialize in writing reference books. As far as we know, however, we are the only content provider specializing in original, large-scale, multi-authored, refereed knowledge publications.

**ATG:** How do the services that *Berkshire* offers other publishers impact the price of a reference work? Is the price more than if the publisher were to produce the work by itself? Less?

**DL & KC:** The price to libraries for what we produce is the same as for similar works produced in-house by our clients. One thing we do offer is speed, as we tend to complete projects more quickly than do in-house operations. For example, one client did share their P&L with us for a specific project. Their cost projections were just about the same as ours, but we completed the project in less than half the time they would have. This meant that they had a return on their investment faster and libraries had the work sooner.

We have absorbed a Yankee mentality from living in New England and our aim is to provide great value. We simply don't believe that great works have to be bogged down in inordinate hours of staff meetings or burdened with out-of-control costs. Our team is passionate about facilitating the delivery of top quality insights from the sources closest to the information. We use our IT systems to circumvent costly processes and bureaucratic delays and we are constantly pushing the limits of everything we do to do it better, more efficiently, and more effectively. In fact, we like to think that by producing high-quality content effectively we can help hold down the price of reference works.

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### David Levinson, Ph.D., President

David Levinson is a cultural anthropologist who has edited more than forty volumes — virtually all of them award-winners — in the past ten years. David also has a long involvement with electronic publishing and was involved in the design and development of three electronic products in the 1990s: *Native Americans on Disc* (SilverPlatter), the *Cross-Cultural CD* (SilverPlatter) and the *eCollection of Ethnography* (HRAF). He has given papers on electronic publishing at the **American Association for the Advancement of Science** and at the **International Online** meeting in London in 1992.

David holds a Ph.D. from **SUNY Buffalo** and an M.P.A. from **New York University** and until co-founding **Berkshire** in 1995, he was vice president of the **Human Relations Area Files at Yale University (HRAF)**. David has more than twenty years of experience working with the anthropological knowledge organization systems that provide the foundation for the **Berkshire** database and taxonomic systems. He was a consultant to the **National Museum of Ethnology** in Japan on developing a taxonomy to classify their collection.

David presently serves as **Berkshire's** editorial director for several major reference works: the *Encyclopedia of Crime and Punishment* (Sage 2002), the *Encyclopedia of Modern Asia* (Scribners 2002), and the *Religion & Society* series (Routledge).

David's strong interests both in the history of African-American religions and in local history have led him to a new project outside of **Berkshire Publishing's** activities. David is currently writing the history of the **AME Zion Church** in Great Barrington, which has the dual distinction of having **W.E.B. Du Bois** and the family of **Elizabeth Freeman** (the first slave in the United States freed by a court because of mistreatment) as members.



**Levinson & Christensen Interview**  
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**ATG:** Do you "brand" your work so that people know that an encyclopedia bearing another publisher's imprint is actually your work? Or is that a case-by-case concern, depending on the contract?

**DL & KC:** In the last couple of years our contracts do stipulate title page credit for the **Berkshire Publishing Group**, but this isn't something reviewers have paid much attention to. **David Levinson** is the editor or editor-in-chief of some 32 works and **Karen**, too, is the editor of some of our projects. Our names, and those of the wonderful scholars we work with, seem to have more recognition than the company does, at least at the

moment. But we've seen that among scholars, **Berkshire's** name has begun to connote a certain creative approach, intellectual rigor, and project management skills that are attractive to the editors and contributors. The whole idea of a brand is that it gives a consumer confidence in what they're spending their money on, and we do feel it's important that people know when a work has come from us.

**ATG:** Whether the topic is sports, religion or the environment, the common thread running through your works is their international scope. How did that develop? How has it been received in the market place?

**DL & KC:** As an environmental writer (**Karen**) who lived and worked in England for more than a decade and as an anthropolo-

gist (**David**) specializing in cross-cultural analysis, both of us have a global perspective and intense desire to understand the whole world. We doubt if we would do a project if it were not big and global (our huge *Modern Asia* is a rare exception, and we have become deeply interested in that particular region of the world).

The global perspective is one of our signature features and if reviews are a good indicator, is clearly seen by librarians, scholars, and students as a valuable and often unique element of our works. Now, as more researchers use the Internet as a point of access to information, the knowledge community truly knows no boundaries. That being said, it's also important to point out that there is lots of information not available, or not available in English. When we were developing the *International Encyclopedia of Women & Sports*, we wrote to people all over the world for information about historical and contemporary women's sports. We received packages of photographs, newspaper clippings, and government reports and had to do further research ourselves to create many articles. Because we often work in emerging fields - such as environmental history and leadership studies - our global perspective creates some major challenges. But we love challenges.

**ATG:** It sounds like you wouldn't have it any other way.

**DL & KC:** Definitely. Most of our projects develop out of strong personal interest. The *Encyclopedia of Community*, for example, which we'll be bringing out with Sage next summer, grew out of **Karen's** research on community and **David's** involvement in the anthropology of human relationships. Community is global, and we're working hard to ensure that we provide perspectives from all parts of the world, as well as covering all the community topics - such as "bowling alone" - being debated today.

**ATG:** One of your main strengths is the extensive list of international contributors that you can call upon. How did you build such an imposing list?

**DL & KC:** First and foremost we believe that communities form around information and around the pursuit of knowledge. The key to tapping into these knowledge communities is based on good human relations and an organized approach to tracking who knows what and where they are. We and our staff love working with scholars. We value their expertise and experience. We hire staff who genuinely value knowledge and who know that their job is to help scholars share their knowledge with us and we are proud that many eminent scholars have worked with us for years.

People are always amazed that among our eleven employees are two highly-skilled technical people. We are continually building our

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Title	Publisher	Pub. Date	Vols.
Encyclopedia of World Cultures (HRAF)	G.K. Hall & Co.	1,991	10
Encyclopedia of Marriage and the Family	Macmillan	1,995	2
Encyclopedia of Cultural Anthropology	Henry Holt & Co.	1,996	4
American Immigrant Cultures (HRAF)	Macmillan	1,997	2
<b>Encyclopedia of the Human Experience series:</b>			
Ethnic Relations: A Cross-Cultural Encyclopedia	ABC-CLIO	1994-1998	1
Health and Illness: A Cross-Cultural Encyclopedia			1
Human Environments: A Cross-Cultural Encyclopedia			1
Language and Communications: A Cross-Cultural Encyclopedia			1
Law and Politics: A Cross-Cultural Encyclopedia			1
Marriage, Family, and Relationships: A Cross-Cultural Encyclopedia			1
Religion: A Cross-Cultural Encyclopedia			1
Encyclopedia of World Sport	ABC-CLIO	1,996	3
Global Village Companion	ABC-CLIO	1,996	1
Ethnic Groups Worldwide	Oryx	1,998	1
Encyclopedia of Human Emotions	Macmillan	1,999	2
Encyclopedia of Women and Sports	Macmillan	2,001	3
Wilson Chronology of Religions	Wilson	2,001	1
<b>Religion and Society series (Vols. 1-3):</b>			
Encyclopedia of Millennialism and Millennial Movements	Routledge	2000-2001	1
Encyclopedia of African and African-American Religions			1
Encyclopedia of Fundamentalism			1
Wilson Chronology of Human Rights	Wilson	2,002	1
Encyclopedia of Modern Asia	Scribner	2,002	6
Encyclopedia of Crime and Punishment	Sage	2,002	4
Encyclopedia of World Environmental History	Routledge	2,003	3
Encyclopedia of Community	Sage	2,003	4
Encyclopedia of Homelessness	Sage	2,003	1
Encyclopedia of Leadership	Sage	2,004	4
<b>Religion &amp; Society series (Vols. 4-6):</b>			
Encyclopedia of Religious Rituals	Routledge	2,003	1
Encyclopedia of Religion and War			1
Encyclopedia of Religious Freedom			1
<b>Total</b>			<b>65</b>



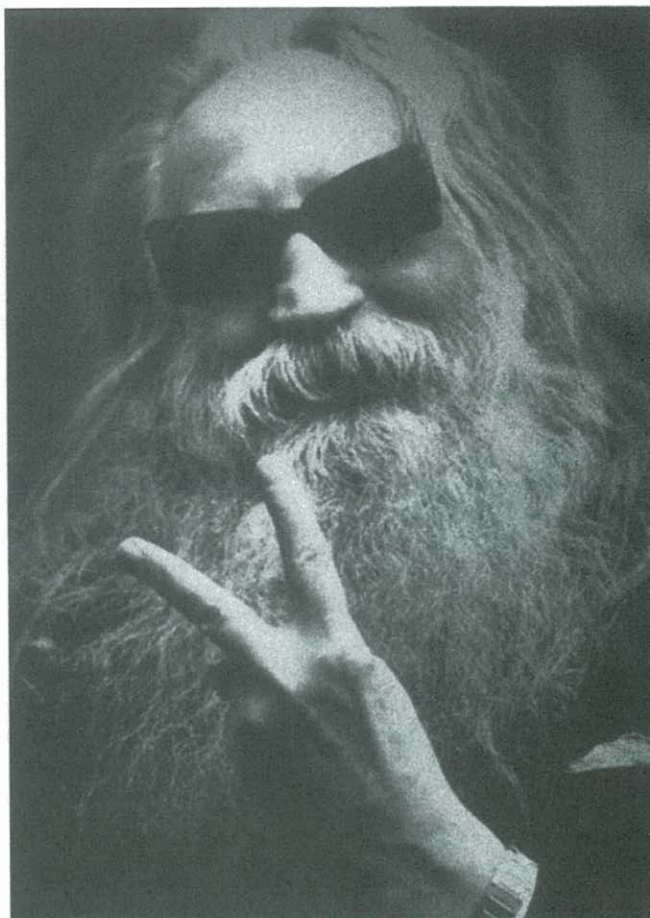
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#### Levinson & Christensen Interview from page 66

information system to make it easier and quicker to reach and work with people around the world. Our sophisticated systems allow our editorial team to concentrate on people and ideas, the core of our business.

**ATG:** But it takes more than a sophisticated information system. There must be a lot of communication and interaction with your contributors.

**DL & KC:** There is no doubt about that. One of the reasons we've been able to develop such a huge international network is that we focus on building a team (back to sports again!). We keep contributors in the loop and have found that there are interlocking networks of experts we can now tap into quite easily. We don't take anything for granted. We are proactive and dogged about getting the information we think readers will want to have.

We're passionate about what we do and think that creating knowledge is a way to make the world a better place. We love global topics and global debates. We have inter-

national employees (languages spoken by staffers over the course of our work on the *Encyclopedia of Modern Asia* included Korean, Turkish, Japanese, Persian, Hindi, and Mandarin), and love the contrast between the traditional New England Main Street where we work and the global power of the work we do.

**ATG:** Where do most of your ideas come from? Do publishers seek you out with specific projects in mind? Or do you generate most of the ideas and then look for a likely publisher?

**DL & KC:** Almost all the ideas are ours, although sometimes we will take a general idea suggested by a publisher and figure out how turn it into an encyclopedia. Someone just told us that we have "great instincts," and we guess that's probably true, given that less than a month after September 11th our *Encyclopedia of Fundamentalism*, the third volume in our Religion & Society series with Routledge, was published. Next came the four-volume *Encyclopedia of Crime & Punishment*, with substantial coverage of terrorism, crime scene investigation, and victim identification. And at that point we were in final

stages of work on the *Encyclopedia of Modern Asia*, which unlike most books about Asia included full coverage of contemporary issues and events in Central and Southwestern Asia. We had to do some last minute updating, but the focus of the project was right on target and should be a terrific resource for students who want to understand events of the past year.

But we don't entirely pre-determine a work and then try to find academic editors and a publisher. Ours is a collegial approach where instead we try to define the project so that it fits the list and market of a specific publisher—to advance their goals. Berkshire's leadership for content and project development is a fully collaborative process, between the two of us and also supported by a growing professional team.

**ATG:** Do you have an advisory board of librarians and scholars to assist in topic development?

**DL & KC:** We haven't had a formal company-wide advisory board, but we'd be remiss if we didn't recognize the value of the ongoing counsel we've received from Will-

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iam H. McNeill and Allen Guttman, as well as from many anthropologists over the last six years. Our advisors have normally been specific to the work at hand and we've not formalized the relationships because we are always moving into new areas. We've always consulted with librarians, scholars, teachers, and students in developing projects and we continue to do that in order to keep apprised of how research needs and interests may be changing. Each specific work does have its own editorial board, and we are increasingly likely to include librarians on those boards as we did for our *Encyclopedia of Crime & Punishment* (Sage 2002).

**ATG:** We noticed that there is a part of your Website called *Berkshire ePublishing*. What is that all about?

**DL & KC:** *Berkshire Publishing* is at the forefront of delivery of global reference to a global audience, and we are, we hope, balancing prudence with passion as we position ourselves to take advantage of new opportunities as information seekers increasingly turn to electronic resources. Some of our publishers are consulting with us now on the best way to support the print publications with electronic access. Having "*Berkshire ePublishing*" on our website and therefore part of our mission, keeps all of us focused on this new opportunity. We don't know exactly what form it will take, but we are aware of the growing need on the part of reference consumers to have information made available electronically. Our effectiveness with electronic content management certainly gives us the ability to consider many ways to link consumers directly to the data in the ways they desire.

**ATG:** How do you see your electronic efforts affecting the print side of your business?

**DL & KC:** There is no need for electronic publishing to have any effect on the print side of our business until information consumption really shifts from print to electronic. Electronic publishing will become a reality in the reference world. There already are a number of excellent resources that combine print and electronic products. For *Berkshire*, the goal is not to neglect one for the other, but to be "delivery neutral," providing content in the way the end-users need it delivered.

There is, of course, the further challenge of the need for our industry to develop clear standards for content formats, identifies, and revenue and distribution models. Our management team now includes an executive who has extensive experience in product development across many media forms. The important question for us is not which

### Karen Christensen, CEO

**Karen Christensen** comes from the Silicon Valley and grew up around the computer industry. She graduated from **UC Santa Barbara** with a degree in literature before moving to London, where she worked for **Blackwell Science** and **Faber & Faber**. She was editorial assistant to **Valerie (Mrs. T. S.) Eliot** and worked in the **Eliot** flat in Kensington on the first volume of the *TSE Letters* (1988).

**Karen** has taken a leadership role in the application of technology to both publishing and content management as well as technology applications issues within the educational and library worlds. She is on the board of **bTech**, a western Massachusetts association focused on technology-oriented businesses, is a new and active member of the **Software and Information Industry Association (SIIA)** and a member of its E-publishing Standards and Digital Rights Management working groups.

**Karen** has served as senior editor of **Berkshire's International Encyclopedia of Women and Sports** (Macmillan 2001) and coeditor of the *Encyclopedia of World Sport* (ABC-CLIO 1996/Oxford 1999). Currently, **Karen** is the project director for **Berkshire's Encyclopedia of Community** (Sage 2003) and the *International Encyclopedia of Environmental History* (Routledge 2003).

**Karen's** own book, *Eco Living* (published in French and Chinese versions as well as having been released in the UK), grew out of her keen interest in developing practical ways to live an environmentally friendly life. Her other books include a highly praised children picture book, *Rachel's Roses*, and the *Global Village Companion*, which she coauthored with **David Levinson**.

In April 2001 she was featured in *Working Woman* as the JPMorganChase Working Woman of the Month, and she currently serves on the regional board of education.

medium do we want to select, but rather what is the delivery medium the end-consumer finds makes the most useful reference. It could be a combination or singular formats all based on market needs.

**ATG:** You also offer customized content development for organization Websites as well as online fact sheets and other curriculum support. Do you see that as a major part of your future business?

**DL & KC:** Reference is becoming very personalized. Each consumer needs information for different reasons. Some people are exploring topics and ideas, but many have highly specific needs. We want to help both groups find what they need as quickly and pleasantly as possible. Information gathering should be a positive experience, not a frustrating one. A wide variety of organizations want to be seen as the predominant information source within very specific niches. Often times those organizations do control the channels of communication to the end consumer, but they lack the ability to provide the content. **Berkshire Publishing** wants to become a leading provider of high-quality global history and cultural reference information to libraries and other reference users. To become a global provider we have to think about how to satisfy the information needs of a wide variety of clients and readers.

When an organization has a need for top-quality reference content, we believe their needs will be most effectively and cost-efficiently served by choosing **BPG**

as a collaborator. We do this by continuing to package major global reference products, by developing the depth and breadth of our world cultures database, and by seeking out the cutting-edge global topics and being ready to develop them efficiently.

**ATG:** What else does the future hold for *Berkshire Publishing*?

**DL & KC:** Technologies to share knowledge have become very important to us, and we're working on a model that we think will satisfy the needs of librarians and students. We can't give a lot of details now since we are in the throes of exploration and development with some of our client publishers, but these Knowledge Centers will bring information together in ways that reflect the best qualities of our print publications: multidisciplinary, global, and cutting edge.

While we continue to develop big print encyclopedias on exciting topics, we're diversifying what we do, too. We're working on trade books, and looking for ways to get the information we've gathered into the hands of students around the world. The subjects we work on are expanding, too. **Karen's** first job in London was at **Blackwell Scientific Publications**, in wonderfully Dickensian offices in Holborn, so it's not a surprise that we're moving into life sciences. And of course we'll be doing more on sports and religion! 